
SOME RECENT
STUDIES IN
ENGLISH PROSODY
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English Prosody

By

George Saintsbury

Fellow of the Academy

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SOME RECENT STUDIES IN ENGLISH PROSODY

BY GEORGE SAINTSBURY

FELLOW OF THE ACADEMY

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It is some dozen years since the present speaker began, and some eight or nine since he finished, the publication of an historical survey of practical English Prosody, following it up still more recently with one of Prose Rhythm. Although received with a good deal of favour, these books, as treatises on one of the most controversial of all subjects could not fail to be, were met with not a little disagreement: and, whether by coincidence or consequence, prosodic studies, which had already been somewhat numerous, have multiplied since; most of them, as was again likely, being based on principles different from, not to say opposed to, mine.

The purpose of the present paper, however, is not direct controversy with, or rebuttal of, any of these. My system may be 'mishmash', as I believe one English critic has called it, or 'drivel', as it has been denominated by an American professor. . But epithet-slinging of this kind does not seem to me to be essentially, though it may be not unhistorically, academic; and individual controversy too often leads to it. I shall even, I hope not to the disappointment of my audience, mention few names in the ensuing survey. It is the theories, rather than the theorists, or even the manners of theorizing, that I wish to consider. As this could hardly be done without at least posing my own procedure, I hope I may be excused for giving, as shortly and with as little egotism as possible, an abstract of that.

My object was not to construct an *a priori* theory of prosody at all, but to examine the prosodic substance of English poetry as a whole, and to discover, if possible, in what way it was constructed. I found, as it seemed to me, and to not a few others, that a system of syllabic equivalence and substitution composing, and equating or contrasting, different prosodic units for which I kept the old traditional name of feet, pervaded the whole of it, from at least the twelfth century

onwards, some elements of this being far earlier. Into the origin and nature, as distinguished from the contrasted value and arrangement, of long and short syllables, I did not enter; beyond pointing out that neither accent, nor stress, nor, except in a purely differential sense, quantity would account for it satisfactorily. By differential, I mean that things of one kind were short, and those of another long, with an occasional faculty of change usually called commonness. And there was an end of it. This system was applied to the whole of English verse, beginning from the thirteenth century, the first in which English, as distinguished from Old English, can be said certainly to exist, to the close of the nineteenth. It was found, by the consent of at least a sufficient number of competent judges, to fit, to require no straining, no omission, and no condemnation of anything that could be called good poetry.

I could not, having included in my survey nearly all prosodists of the past and present, expect that this would please, far less that it would satisfy, all of the latter. In the first place, there were certain theories of more or less age, which it either neglected or contradicted. In the second, there was an absence of what is called scientific appearance about it. Its mathematics were of the simplest, and its physics said nothing about the glottis or about breath-units, &c. In the third, it required no apparatus. In the fourth, it was not sufficiently 'modern'. In the fifth, there was what I felt to be a probably annoying combination of unpretentiousness and finality about it. It gave no one, certainly not myself, any feeling of a claim to ingenious discovery, or daring imagination. The secret of English poetry lay at your feet; and by merely paying a little attention to the whole of that poetry itself, you found it.

It was natural that more ambitious, perhaps they may think themselves more imaginative, persons should not be content with anything so humdrum, or prepared to undertake anything so laborious; and they have in some cases continued, in others begun, more airy speculations, or more elaborate laboratory work. The systems may, I think, be fairly collected under the following heads:

1. A partly old, partly new system of quantification, which has, as its object or objects, partly to account for and establish those intrinsic or related values of 'long' and 'short' which have been noticed, partly to make new combinations of them.

2. An endeavour to oust, or at least to supplement, regular metre by irregular rhythm.

3. Very elaborate mechanical systems of phonography, in which the reading of poetry by numbers of different persons, and the fashions of

their utterance, were taken down, sometimes in carefully constructed and machined chambers, collected, averaged, &c.

4. The old, very natural, and at first sight very plausible attempt to identify musical with poetical harmony, and explain the latter by the laws of the former.

There are, as always in such cases, varieties and combinations of these: but I think the four heads comprise most, if not all, of the prevalent views of prosody, other than the purely accentual one, which shades from a sort of go-as-you-please-so-long-as-you-keep-the-proper-number-of-accent to something not much more than terminologically different from my own; the strict syllabic with elision, which is chiefly favoured by foreigners; and my own system. Of these latter I have said enough already elsewhere and need not repeat it.

Of the first or quantitative division I prefer to say very little, for more reasons than one; the chief, and on this occasion at least all sufficient, being that it cannot be called 'recent'. Its forms of theory cover more than three hundred years from Stanyhurst to Stone. Its practitioners have varied in quality from the lowest poetasters to unquestionable poets like Campion in the earliest and the present Poet Laureate (who, as I am well aware, is not a pure Quantitivist) in the latest stage. The apparent temptations to it have varied likewise, from innocent but puerile notions that we ought to imitate the classics in everything, to imaginative, but I fear also imaginary, conceptions of the necessity of conflict between ordinary pronunciation and metrical value. But it is not new; I have long ago said as much as I think needful on the question of syllabic quantity in English, and as I have nothing to add, so I have nothing of importance to alter, and certainly nothing to withdraw.

Nor need very much be said of the Anarchists, who again are a rather parti-coloured body, but who may be said to be united in an enmity, which the Quantitivists do not feel, to the principle of metre itself, as it has been accepted in all ages and countries which have recognized metre at all—that is to say that it is *recurrent* rhythm. To argue with them is slightly absurd. There is no positive objection to what they want and do, in itself. It may occasionally seem to us very ugly, but we know that things based on something like its principle in the Authorised Version of the Bible, in Ossian, in Blake, in Whitman even, have been very fine indeed. Only, it is not metre; it is not a substitute for metre; and though it may seem to some, or be called by the loose language of others, poetry, it is not what we mean by that word. Let them do it if they like; let us take it when it is good, and reject it when it is bad. Meanwhile we will stick to

poetry, and to metre, which is our form of poetry. And to this, unless we are to be the *bourgeois* of a new Bolshevism, and to be exterminated with our poetry and our metre altogether, they can make no objection.

With the Mechanics and Musicians, especially with the former (for the latter are old friends or enemies or both), it is different. Both sects have multiplied greatly of late, indeed many individual prosodists hold of both; and the reason of this is sufficiently obvious. The word has long gone forth that everything is to be scientific; and though that term is equivocal to the last degree, and perhaps incapable of strict logical definition, some of its properties, and still more of its accidents, are commonly if confusedly apprehended by most people, respected by many, and passionately affectioned by some. Among the properties may be included systematic arrangement by rule involving no or few exceptions, and a mainly mathematical method of procedure, with abundant experiment. Among the accidents, 'apparatus', as it may be succinctly termed, is important. Now prosody of the older sort, with occasional exceptions, relied on observation rather than experiment; and needed no apparatus whatever of a mechanical kind. A library of poetry and an ear supplied the prosodist with all he wanted. But of late the progress of what used to be called philosophical instruments, and especially the invention of the phonograph, have inspired the would-be scientific student of Numbers with many new thoughts—whether such as would be approved by Pallas or Apollo is another question. 'Collect a company of individuals and make them read or recite poetry aloud' is the fundamental commandment, though, as we shall see, the aims and processes extend far beyond this. At first the results in the way of stress, division of intervals and the like, were merely taken as heard. But of late, especially in America—where there are many universities with much money and an eager desire for something new—apparatus which outdoes Lagado, sound-proof chambers, recording instruments of the utmost delicacy and the like, have been constructed and consecrated, if not always exclusively, to the purpose. The results, arranged in rows of figures or sets of waved and straight lines, &c., &c., have been taken down, transcribed and published in books and articles devoted to the subject, some of these being quite voluminous.

But the results of these results? Before considering them argumentatively I may mention a curious coincidence of opinion on the subject. Some years ago, when that subject was fresh, a friend of mine, a most excellent scholar, but somewhat more *cupidus novarum rerum* than I am myself, took it up, but dropped it, finding, as he

said, that the results 'were not definite enough'. Quite recently a reviewer, entirely unknown to me, but evidently an honest and unsophisticated person, after making generous allowance for the diligence and curiosity shown in a book of the kind just mentioned, remarked, finally and frankly, that after all 'he didn't quite see what it came to'.

I have seldom read an observation which seemed to me to touch the point more acutely. I could of course fill this paper, if it were becoming to do so, with jokes, cheap or not so very cheap, on the drums covered with rubber and mica, mounted with pointers (including special pointers for 'nose-tones') which work on smoked paper; or the cabinets mattressed and padded as if for the reception of——: but I should be dropping into the fault I decline if I wrote or spoke the word which will suggest itself. By all means let the most complicated apparatus that ingenuity can devise be used for any purpose that it can achieve. But what purposes, in the special realm or region of prosody, *have* these arrangements achieved? Nay what, in the most sanguine but most reasonable hopes, *can* they achieve?

Of what they have achieved, in recent years and since I wrote, it is possible to give some idea, though that idea may be better suited to the all-observant eye than to the less receptive ear. A line of *Paradise Lost*, to take an instance, was read by three well-educated persons into the machine described above, and it recorded, in fractions of a second, the time they took for each syllable and some pauses. The results were as follows in decimals:

No. 1.	.28	.38	.12	.18	.15	.35	.2	.2	.18	.65
2.	.4	.4	.15	.3	.1	.2	.3	.3	.25	.8
3.	.2	.3	.18	.25	.15	.34	.18	.2	.25	.42

2 and 3 also occupied time in pauses amounting to .4, .15.

Now this with its striking differences—*A* taking 65 units of time to do the same thing which *B* takes 8 to do; *B* and *C* taking exactly the same time (25 units) to pronounce one syllable, while on another their times stand in the ratio of 2 to 34—this certainly does 'come to something'. When we are told further that *A*, the slow man, was a professional elocutionist, it comes, though not to our surprise, to something more. But what do these 'somethings' concern? The verse? Even the actual quantity-value (or whatever word be preferred) of the syllables themselves? Surely nothing of the sort. What they tell us wholly and solely concerns the individuals on whom, or by whose assistance, the experiment was conducted. They might be useful in the construction of a *signalment*—a minute description

of the persons. *A* speaks slowly and distinctly; *B* speaks as a rule much faster; *C* speaks irregularly. But of the stuff and the subject we learn nothing whatever.

Let us pass to a still more elaborate employment of the same or again more elaborate machinery. I will read an extract:

‘With the records by sound-photography the following plan was carried out; after the observer has finished his tapping reproductions [he has I should say quoting textually again ‘heard a series of six time intervals produced by relatively unobtrusive clicks from an electric sounder, and is asked to reproduce the series as accurately as possible by means of tapping his finger upon an electric key attached to a kymograph which records his reproduction’]. Then after he has finished his tapping reproduction, and has heard the accelerating series twenty-four times, he is told to listen to it, and accompany it each time by uttering the word “tip” for every click.’ There is a great deal more of it, but that will do.

Now I suppose it to be very likely that some of my hearers may have been thinking, ‘It is all very well to hold this up to ridicule, but it is one of the methods of experimental psychology, and we hold that it gives valuable results.’

I shall only request them to remember that I am not discussing any such application of such methods, or giving any opinion on their merits as so used. I only wish to point out, in my own division, that no such process of tip-tapping, or anything of the kind, can tell us anything about the rhythm of prose or poetry. It may tell us something about the physical-psychological characteristics of the individual experimenting, or being experimented upon. It may provide fresh material for that individual’s dossier, to be registered and stored by a new Government Department. But on no passage of Chaucer or of Swinburne, of Malory or of Ruskin, can it shed the very dimmest light as to its structure, arrangement, or rhythmical quality. The results of the machinery remain as remote from literature as the machinery itself; while, even as regards these results, the tyranny of individuality retains its scornful predominance. Each intelligent observer, patient, subject, or whatever he is to be termed, can whisper to himself, ‘At the next examination, if I choose, I can upset my record utterly.’

So let us pass to the pure Musicians for whom, though I think they are seriously wrong, and are doing much mischief in matters prosodic, I have a respect quite different from that with which I regard the Mechanics, albeit there are, as has been said, holy or unholy alliances or leagues between the two nations. The principle of these musicians, as they sometimes rather arbitrarily announce, is that ‘poetic rhythm

is a branch of musical rhythm'. I have abundantly shown elsewhere, and may slightly touch on here later, the disastrous results of taking this for granted: for the moment I wish to dwell, and to dwell a little more fully, on the enormity of the question which the principle itself begs. Poetic rhythm is *not*, in English, a branch of musical rhythm. Singing is, with us, *not* saying. When we talk of a poet's 'singing robes' we are, as we so often are, indulging in metaphor, in analogy, in figurative expression of this kind or that. If you put these propositions to the plain man, and induce him, which is possible though not frequently done, to give his mind to them, he will hardly deny what I say. The two processes are produced by the same organs, no doubt; they have characteristics in common; they are susceptible of marriage; there is no absolute *gulf* fixed between them. But there is a clear *line*; and the laws that prevail on the two sides of that line are different. It may be said, 'This is all very fine as an utterance of Sir Positive, but where are your proofs?' There are so many that one must select from them. I do not lay any stress on the fact, though it is certainly rather a curious one, that the authors of 'Proud Maisie' and of 'I arise from dreams of thee' not only did not know a note of music, but could neither produce nor recognize a tune. That might be dismissed (though I fancy the dismissal could be questioned before a suitable court of appeal) as merely an instance of eccentric personality, and of the common disconnexion between artistic power and scientific knowledge. But I have appealed to what seems to me an irresistible proof in the still more common acknowledgement of the difference of speech and song: others may be found in the department of example. Some, I hope many, of my hearers may know Charles Salaman's famous or once famous setting of Shelley's 'Lines to an Indian Air', already mentioned by its first verse. This setting has been, I believe, regarded by many competent lovers of poetry, some at least of whom were also trained musicians, as almost the *ne plus ultra* of success in a process rather notorious for failure—which notoriety, by the way, is itself something that the musicians have got to explain away. So admirably does Salaman's music appeal to the musical ear of persons who possess a poetical ear likewise, that it actually associates itself with Shelley's verse; you remember it as you read; you admit the musician as no unworthy assessor and ally to the poet; and you also remember the other glorious unset lines in the *Prometheus* as to the soul floating down the river of song itself. Yet, when you examine the two side by side, you find that the musician has, quite rightly judging by results, proceeded on perfectly different structural lines in composing his rhythm from those which the poet has used.

A precisian without an ear may even say that he has taken great liberties. Shelley's scheme is of the simplest, a three-foot iambic measure with free anapæstic substitution, and in two places only (the last but three and the last but one of the third stanza), an extension, quite common and simple again, of the three feet to four. Salaman reduplicates the words, and therefore the feet, constantly—'And the stars', 'of thee', 'a spirit'—besides repeating whole lines in a sort of reverse refrain-fashion, like that common, but less agreeable to the poetical ear, in anthems. Besides this, he uses single syllables as the basis on occasion, not merely of one but of two, three, or four notes, throws in frequent intervals of music without words, &c., &c. The thing is in fact rather what musicians themselves used, I believe, to call a 'lesson' on the theme of the words than a mere setting of them; a lesson in the other sense too—for it no doubt helps sluggish or ignorant ears to detect some suggestions of the poetry itself. It is admirable and delightful; but its actual rhythmical system has only a distant connexion with that of the original. It is a translation or transposition into something quite different.

But perhaps some modern musical critic may say either that this is bad music, tuny, popular, even Victorian; or that it is a professed variation, a kind of fugue. This would not overthrow my argument entirely, or indeed very sensibly affect it. For the difference of method would remain. But let us turn to something quite different, a piece of that Elizabethan music, in the wide sense of Elizabethan, to which I am glad to see modern musicians paying some attention. There are few more charming examples of this than 'Phillida [or Phillada] flouts me'. The air is so absolutely delightful that for once it is not merely adequate, but altogether superior to the words: if it were not that, from the first as a general rule, we know the one as soon as we know the other, I really doubt whether the words would be more than moderately pleasing. I do not know whether the piece has any recorded history, but I should think it very likely that, as was so common then, the air came first, and the verse-writer caught some of the plaintive and ineffable 'silly sooth' of it.

But it is only the spirit of the two that is identical. I have elsewhere given a study, from a slightly different point of view, of the prosody of 'Phillida'. Here it is chiefly important to point out that, to get the musical scansion, you must to some extent wrench the most obvious poetical one. In fact I do not think that any one would dream, if he had never heard the music, of scanning

'Oh what a pain is love,
I cannot bear it'

otherwise than iambically, which destroys that music at once. Here there are no variations, no importations except perhaps supplementary pauses; no flummery or fugue of any kind whatever. But the music assumes (and in a way justifies the assumption) the right to seem non-naturally. In this case, as in the other, I have not the slightest intention of quarrelling with the marriage. I like the result immensely in each case. But it is a kind of marriage by capture; and the facts show perhaps that marriage by capture may have very happy results. I believe that is a fact independently admitted in other cases. But certainly there are most important differences between the independent actions and ways of the parties to it.

Take yet another case, far inferior in poetical value and certainly an instance of what music can do to enhance good, but not supreme, poetry. I forget the composer's name of the setting of Jean Ingelow's 'When Sparrows Build'. The mere verse is pretty, but not much more: the setting makes it beautiful. But it transposes in order to do this; and what is more, the transposition distinctly alters the natural run of the verse. The actual prosody is of the simplest equivalenced 'common measure'. The setting breaks it up and pads it out into something quite different, much prettier if you like, but with an added prettiness, as of stays and rouge. I have no objection to stays and rouge, but I decline to accept them as Eve's necessary wedding garment. And most of all do I decline to allow the laws, perhaps the quite authentic laws, of the stays and the rouge to be made those of the cheek and the bust. In the case just mentioned, to take two lines only, where the original runs

'My old sorrow wakes and cries

And the scarlet sun doth rise',

the setting puts an immense extra stress on the syllables 'old' and 'sear'. In other words the musical presentation, like the rhetorical presentation of which poetry is also notoriously susceptible, requires and provides decorative ornament of a distinctly separable kind. There need be, though there too often is, no want of harmony between decoration and structure. There may and should be no incompatibility; but compatibility is not identity.

One and only one more, though I could give any number. But perhaps this last is the strongest of all, though one of the simplest. There is a very fine setting, whose I again forget—for I have not seen the printed sheet for decades, though I have every note of the music in my head—of Tennyson's magnificent Echo Song in *The Princess*. The metre of this is again quite simple iambic, and the music follows

it for the first three lines faithfully enough ; but at the fourth it takes the bit in its teeth, turns head over heels, or executes any other metaphorical manœuvre you please. Instead of

And the | wild cat | aract leaps | in glory,
you have

And the wild | cataract leaps | in glory.

An anapaest and a paeon to start with !

Now do I say that this is wrong ? Not in the least—as a *setting*. I will even go so far as to say that the music very happily takes a hint from the words and extemporizes a fresh rendering of their suggestion. But take this rendering and the spirit of it as a metrical form, and you have simple chaos.

No doubt sometimes, nay fairly often, the music adapts itself more or less exactly to the proper scansion. To pick up the old metaphor, the union takes place immediately along the dividing line and keeps in steady contact. But that this is not always, nor perhaps in the majority of cases the fact, must, I think, be admitted by any fair judge.

Still, it may be said, these are, after all, mere instances. ‘Why not fight out the quarrel of “foot” and “bar”, to which the whole thing really comes, more in the abstract?’ The answer is that it is precisely this abstract treatment of prosody which seems to me the source of all the errors of the musical prosodists from Joshua Steele downwards. And Steele’s name suggests to me that perhaps I may be permitted to finish with another observation on him in making which I shall at last break my rule of not naming living persons. As I have said, it seems difficult to believe that any one can really deny this simple proposition, ‘The proof of the prosodic system is the actual scansion of the actual poetry.’ Now of this very Joshua Steele, who is hailed by all musical prosodists as the founder of true theory on the subject, my friend Mr. Omond, who agrees with him as to system, said long ago that ‘Steele’s scansions are utterly wild’. If such are the figs by the judgement of the fig-showers, what are the fig-trees?

And this dissidence extends to other matters, where it is perhaps more fatally, if less rhetorically, manifest. Nowhere perhaps is this the case more than in regard to blank verse. Blank verse is, one may almost say, the distinguishing glory of English poetry. No other language possesses it in anything like the same perfection. In French it will not do at all ; in Italian it is defeated by the intensely rhyming, or at any rate assonant character of the language ; in German it can flourish, but with nothing like the variety and freedom which it possesses with us. But blank verse is very ill to musicalize ; and,

accordingly, the musicians have had a great deal of trouble with it. Some of them rule it out altogether as not poetry; others allow it a sort of privilege or uncovenanted mercy in the way of the iambic scansion which they deny to other metres; others again, perhaps the majority, turn it topsy-turvy, and make it trochaic (I may observe in passing that some people seem to me to be born with trochaic ears) or else a jumble of various 'bars'. Such is with them the fate of the wonderful metre which, unimitated and unfathered, emerges first in Chaucer's prose; dips under in the chaos of the fifteenth century, comes back at first timidly and imitatively with the dawn of the Elizabethan age, triumphs with Marlowe and Shakespeare and Milton, withstands the misunderstanding and the partial contempt of the eighteenth century, and rises again to undreamt-of splendour in the nineteenth with Wordsworth and Shelley and Tennyson.

With it, as with everything else, the foot system has no difficulty. Born as it is of the verse itself, the verse recognizes it at once as does every other English form. Of all these forms it has taken account; it imposes no precedent theory upon them; it derives from them; it is purely and comprehensively inductive. It turns no blind eyes; it does not add or take away; it requires no machinery, no legerdemain, no evictions, no distortion. The poetry itself, all the poetry as far as possible, and an ear which can distinguish the substance and essence of that poetry from its accidents and complements—these are all it knows, and all it needs to know or to have. It may be possible that some people are born, not merely, as I said, with trochaic instead of iambic ears, but with musical instead of poetical ones. Those who fortunately possess both should not be Pharisaical, and I hope they are not. If anybody can adjust to musical principles poetry which is already good prosodically, without making it prosodically cacophonous, let him. Nay if, as in the case of Shelley and Salaman, he can build on a prosodic substructure a beautiful musical superstructure, let him by all means do so. What I consider inadmissible is to force on poetry such distortions as those in which the musical prosodists, from Steele downwards, habitually indulge; and to discard, if not to abuse, the true principles of prosody itself, because they are not those of another branch of the Art of Sound.



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